

THE FINAL REPORT OF THE NEWARK IN THE 21ST CENTURY TASK FORCE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Newark in the 21st Century Task Force was created in the summer of 1997 to examine and evaluate Newark's prospects as the new millennium approached. The 22 civic leaders comprising the membership of the Task Force were drawn from throughout the Newark metropolitan region. The group's mission was and is to articulate a vision for the city in the century just beginning, using Newark's recent past and current condition as a backdrop.

Task Force members engaged in a structured discussion to select issues that met two criteria; first, each issue had to be critical to Newark's future, and second, it had to be an issue that the Task Force, through its attention, might affect positively. Using these parameters, four issues emerged:

- Newark's image, particularly among nonresidents;
- Newark's role in and contribution to the broader regional economy;
- Newark's diverse assets and the importance of identifying and cataloguing them; and
- Newark's public schools.

The Report is considered by no means the last word, but ultimately an effort to set forth general guidelines for implementing solutions. The Task Force believes that the issues addressed in this report warrant serious deliberation and attention if the city's renaissance is to be sustained and made to reach and include the broad racial, social and economic diversity that is Newark.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Issue One – Newark's Image

For much of this nation's history, Americans have had an unfavorable opinion of its urban centers. For most cities, unfortunately, and particularly for Newark, an underlying reality has lent truth to some of these criticisms. Moreover, as this report indicates, it is not only suburbanites and out-of-towners who have a dim view of the city, but also a sizable share of Newark's own populace. Indeed, an Eagleton Poll conducted in 1997 found that 56% of residents interviewed said they wanted to live elsewhere. While the negative perceptions are grounded in a certain reality, the question arises whether they capture the complete picture of life and community in Newark. Surely they do not.

Issue One – Newark's Image (cont.)

There is no escaping the fact that Newark's problems are real and rank fairly high among America's inventory of urban blight. Still, it is the view of the Task Force that Newark ought to be doing much more to counter the exaggerated negative stereotypes by emphasizing its under-appreciated assets. Efforts should be launched on several fronts to combat distortion and false impressions, as well as to alter some of the realities that contribute to those negative impressions.

Recommendations

1. Develop and implement an image campaign with adequate resources to be effective.
2. Establish a forum, where all stakeholders can freely and frankly discuss Newark's future.
3. Clean up neglected eyesores.
4. Empower community organizations to promote Newark through their neighborhood activities.
5. The Directory of the City Assets should be updated on a regular basis.

Issue Two – Newark and the Regional Economy

Although Newark is no longer the economic heart of northern New Jersey, it nonetheless still plays an important economic role in both the larger New York metropolitan region and New Jersey's northern tier. As Newark emerges from its long period of economic decline, it is essential that the city's leaders act swiftly and creatively to seize the opportunity presented by the economic upturn, enhanced by the vision and investments of private philanthropy, in order to enlarge and deepen Newark's contribution to the wider region of which it is a part.

Recommendations

1. Newark's public and private-sector leadership should cooperate in designing strategies to derive maximum advantage from the city's economic building blocks: transportation, entertainment, health, higher education, and commercial office activity.
2. Key to Newark's prospects as a useful contributor to the regional economy is its ability to attract a variety of jobs that require the full range of skills and abilities.
3. Newark residents must view their city as part of a larger metropolitan region, one in which resources are plentiful and available to advance Newark's renaissance.
4. Newark should call upon the local institutions of higher education to play a much more active role in helping to position the city as a regional center.

Issue Three - The Newark Renaissance

As in many American cities where an economic turnaround has occurred, Newark's revival is "downtown-centric". The construction of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, sports facilities, entertainment centers and the rehabilitation of commercial property are all concentrated in less than a half square-mile that encompasses most of Newark's business district.

Therefore for Newark to experience a true renaissance, all areas of the city must participate in and benefit from the new economic activity.

Recommendations

1. Occupational skills development must be given high priority by city leaders if the new jobs created in Newark are to be enjoyed by its residents
2. Equitable participation in the construction employment generated by Newark's new investment must be assured to all racial and ethnic groups in the city.
3. It is particularly important that entrepreneurial opportunities be available for minorities, especially African American and Latino to share in business formation and ownership in Newark and the region.

Issue Four -- Newark's School System

The revitalization of Newark now under way will not have broad and sustained impact on the city or its social and economic life if the schools are not substantially improved. The benefits and opportunities resulting from economic growth can be shared equitably if schools produce graduates with the skills needed to compete in the 21st century. There are opportunities for combining emerging commercial development with the physical development of new education facilities. Additionally, much more needs to be done to improve school performance, as well the fiscal and management operation of the district. Moreover, increased accountability at the state and local level is needed. This latter point is of special significance as the district begins a return to local control. It would be extremely detrimental if the same people whose past leadership failures necessitated the state takeover were to regain control of the school system.

Recommendations

1. Establish a citizens' panel to monitor school management and financial issues.
2. New resources for school construction coming to Newark and other Abbott districts must be creatively applied to address the facility needs of the district and the community development needs of neighborhoods.
3. Allowable Abbott school construction costs must reflect the realities of urban construction.

Recommendations – Newark's School System (cont.)

4. The state must assert leadership in responding to the state Supreme Court's directive to provide all children with high-quality preschool education programs, including needed facilities.
5. While the obstacles to turning Newark's schools around are great, the magnitude of the challenge must not be allowed to overshadow the real progress that is being achieved.

CONCLUSION

For over three centuries, the City of Newark has, in a variety of changing ways, been an important place in America. As a center of manufacturing, commerce and finance, Newark has made significant contributions to the economic growth of the region, and the nation. As a community that for decades has endured the forces sweeping over many of the nation's old industrial centers, Newark has had to struggle with the causes and effects of urban decline.

Newark has always been a mirror of the struggles, hopes, and achievements of its people. And, as the 21st century dawn, there are strong indications that it is poised for rebirth in terms of economic health, neighborhood revitalization, and cultural significance. However to bring about the city's transformation it will take the concerted and sustained efforts of all who believe in and care about the city and its people. The Task Force believes the recommendations in this report are critical guideposts in this transformation process.

We commend them to you for consideration, discussion and action